

REVIEWS

Caroline Humphrey. The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies After Socialism. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002. 265pp. Index, bibliography. Paperback. \$18.95. ISBN 0-8014-8773-0.

Anthropologists and folklorists ask different questions. As the field of folklore changes and moves further away from its early focus on oral literature, it is instructive to contrast our discipline with closely related ones, thus getting a better sense of what it means to be a folklorist. This collection of essays by a prominent anthropologist specializing in the economics of the post-Soviet world, especially Mongolia, is a good place to start. Humphrey writes well and the chapter on “Icebergs, Barter, and the Mafia” brought back vivid memories of scrounging for the necessities of life in Kyiv, all the while trying to arrange for transportation to villages so that I could get some fieldwork done. Humphrey categorizes the economic arrangements of the early post-Soviet days and explains them succinctly and clearly. In the next chapter, the author takes up the problem of exclusion, discussing how the collapse of the Soviet Union allowed the renegotiating of who was, and who was not, included in newly formed or reorganized collectives and the systems of protection and support that came with them. If a farm ceased being a kolkhoz, for example, and reconstituted itself as a cooperative, certain families that had previously been part of the group could be dispossessed. Humphrey constructs a model of those on the inside versus those on the outside and vividly describes the pitiful situation of those unfortunate enough to be excluded. Her model of inside/outside is accurate, but, as a folklorist, I felt there was a lack of attention to things predating the Soviet era and disregard for the long tradition of border protection and fear of strangers. Indeed, the Soviet Union epitomized boundary fears, surrounding itself with the Iron Curtain. But drastic inside/outside distinctions are not something that came into being with Soviet rule. Rather, they are a development of an old cultural imperative that can be seen in everything from vernacular architecture with its care to hide the entrance to the home, to greeting customs which go to great lengths to test visitors and to make sure they are acceptable, to legends that equate tall, dark and handsome strangers with the unquiet dead.

A folklorist would likely have a similar reaction to other chapters: while they are interesting, they present one perspective on the current situation, but they suffer from inattention to tradition and to folk belief. The chapter on consumer behavior in Moscow, for example, provides a useful and a detailed description of spending patterns. At the same time, it could profit from seeing that current gender roles evolve from traditional family structures; they are not something that began with Soviet social engineering. The inside/outside issue comes up a number of times. The chapter on consumerism states that Western goods are seen in some way as a sham and that people label them as such to control their own desire for that which is unattainable. A folklorist would likely add that Western products are devalued also because they come from outside and are thus viewed as contaminated. In subsequent chapters Humphrey looks at minorities who engage in trade, sometimes cross-border trade, and foreign capitalists, describing the problems that today’s merchants face. Again a folklorist

might add that discrimination against non-Russians stems from traditional wariness of strangers, not just from Soviet legacies. One chapter discusses economies outside the law, namely the society of thieves. It is very interesting, but disregards parallels to subaltern societies of the past, including such legal guilds as the church-affiliated societies of mendicants, the *kaleki* or *kaliki*.

The last section of the book contains two chapters that come close to being discussions of folk belief. “Avgai Khad, Theft and Social Trust in Post-Communist Mongolia” recounts a trip to a stone to which sacred power had come to be attributed and “Shamans in the City” describes modern day shamanic séances. While interesting, these chapters, too, might disappoint a folklorist. The chapter about the sacred stone concentrates on people’s fear of abandoning an economically valuable item, the car, in spite of threats to their lives from a severe snowstorm. It does not look for reasons why a stone might come to be considered holy nor does it examine the history of homage to sacred places and objects. The shamanism chapter treats the phenomenon in its urban, New Age manifestation, rather than giving the reader the religious history of this belief system. What I found most unsettling about this book is that, by ignoring tradition, it created the appearance that almost everything we observe today is a direct result of Soviet rule. This ascribes much more power to Soviet culture than is warranted and leaves Western readers with an incomplete picture of the countries that came into being with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

While folklorists might find aspects of Humphrey’s book frustrating, they will benefit from seeing the perspective of another discipline. Humphrey describes contemporary phenomena with sensitivity and skill. She should be given credit for describing rural life in addition to the situation in cities. The Soviet Union left a legacy of restricting foreigners to urban areas and too many western scholars have made little attempt to shake free of this legacy and look at the lives of the many people living outside the urban centers. Humphrey looks at both Russia and Mongolia, rare in such works.

While a folklorist might long for Humphrey to apply her talents to an examination of the pre-Soviet and traditional component of the phenomena she describes, we must admit that no one person can do everything. Furthermore, I could argue that, by focusing exclusively on the present, Humphrey provides a needed balance to folklorists in the post-Soviet world. Certainly in Ukraine where I work and amongst the Russian folklorists whom I know, attention to the past can often be excessive. Their desire to recover traditions that existed prior to Soviet attempts at social engineering is understandable. For many, Soviet rule was oppressive and thus they are determined to uncover that which preceded the Soviet era and is unblemished by it. At the same time, their insistence on interviewing only the oldest village residents, on getting them to describe only their earliest experiences, means that they are overlooking the enormously interesting processes at work today where people are trying to establish a new, post-Soviet identity by blending traditional and newly allowed religious elements with those Soviet practices that they still find meaningful. Humphrey may not look at the traditional elements in the cultures of the post-Soviet states, but she does give an astute description of the current situation. If we combine this with the attention that Russian, Ukrainian, and, presumably, Mongolian folklorists are lavishing on the past, we can get a complete picture. It can be our job as folklorists to take the work of anthropologists like

Humphrey and to point out those elements that are traditional, tracing how tradition was used and modified in Soviet times and how it is realized now. Anthropologists, economic anthropologists included, should learn from and use the work of folklorists. For example, folk belief, as articulated in legends about Sten'ka Razin, holds that the accumulation of wealth leads to damnation. Briefly stated, keeping anything for one's self, as Sten'ka Razin did with that money which he did not give to the poor, turns the person, upon his death, into a *klad* (treasure) spirit, doomed to guard the money until another person is greedy and foolish enough to take it. In folklore, these powerful anti-capitalism stories have given birth to new legends about curses attached to wealth. It would be most useful for anthropologists to be aware of this tradition. They would then investigate the issue of antipathy toward wealth and they could tell us how it plays out in everyday economies.

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